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Queering family history and the lives of Irish men before gay liberation

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ABSTRACT

Historians of sexuality commonly ‘read against the grain’ of the criminal archive as a way to reconstruct both the pitfalls and possibilities of queer cruising cultures. One of the drawbacks of this approach is how it can limit our knowledge of queer men to the fleeting moments of pleasure that led to an arrest, thus obscuring the broader complexities of their social world. The sources that can take us beyond this limited viewpoint – such as diaries, letters and memoirs – tend not to survive for same-sex desiring working-class men who did not live in major metropolises. In this article, I offer a replicable method for uncovering and reconstructing such difficult-to-access lives. By queering the practice of family history, the criminal archive becomes just a starting point that can be enriched through genealogical data, such as censuses, birth/marriage/death registrations, as well as more colourful information from now-digitised newspapers. The resulting ‘small queer histories’, I argue, can contribute to not just a deeper understanding of the sexual past but support important political work in the present too. To demonstrate both this methodology and its contemporary value, I use a case study of one man’s life in Ireland in the time before a Gay Liberation movement. I show how it was kinship networks that provided both the emotional and financial resources that enabled this man to both fight against a charge of ‘gross indecency’ and flourish in the decades after his arrest. This surprising reality of past support is of particular importance in a region where religiously sanctioned homophobia and intolerance were later informed by the supposed antipathy of the family to queer desires.

1. Introduction

Late one evening in May 1911, a constable of the Royal Irish Constabulary was patrolling the centre of Belfast, the largest city in the north of Ireland. Walking down a dark alleyway, he discovered George Davidson, an industrial worker in his late twenties, in a deep recess with a boy just shy of his seventeenth birthday. George was arrested and taken with this youth to the police station, where they made contradictory statements about how they came to be in what looked like...
a sexual embrace. Two months later, after several weeks in custody and then some time out on bail, George was put in front of an Irish assizes court, where he pled guilty to a charge of gross indecency. He was eventually released without charge, seemingly because it was his first offence and he had submitted to the court’s judgement, but the witness depositions that describe his moment of public exposure were still later deposited in the public archive.1

Scholars have used such legal records as a way into reconstructing not just the pitfalls of sexual subcultures but the possibilities too, especially in the period when sex between men was largely illegal. Over the last three decades, this ‘reading against the grain’ technique has produced many rich and influential studies (e.g. Boag, 2003; Chauncey, 1994; Houlbrook, 2005; Peniston, 2004; Smith, 2015). Depending on the material of the criminal archive has been a contentious approach, however. Focusing on those who were arrested tells us mostly about the subsection of queer2 men who flouted the law in public rather than private, and men or adolescent boys making statements under duress had good reason to misrepresent or stay silent about their sexual desires. The most critical poststructuralist scholars were wary of the ‘truth’ of these sources; Scott (1991), for example, influentially argued that these top-down viewpoints might have created understandings of modern sexual categories, rather than simply reveal a fixed identity. None of these challenges has sounded the death knell for using legal records, but each has warranted serious methodological reflection (Robertson, 2005).

There is another issue in using the criminal archive for writing queer histories: the documentation created by policing and prosecution often limits our view of the accused to a brief moment of (criminalised) pleasure. We thus risk defining queer men solely by their sexual behaviour, not unlike the pathologizing psychiatrists of the past, even if we can claim more compassionate objectives.3 This quandary can be avoided by supplementing legal records with ego documents, such as memoirs, diaries or letters, but these rare sources usually come from (in) famous metropolitan authors, artists, and intellectuals. How can we avoid obscuring the complexities of the lives of working-class queer men in provincial settings when their voice is rarely recorded in the archival record, and why might the nuance of their stories be important for us today?4

My first aim in this article is to suggest a way around the limitations of the criminal archive, by ‘queering’ (Sedgwick, 1993) the methodology and motivations of family history.5 If we build on the radical potentials of this now multi-billion mass public pastime, historians of sexuality can gain a much broader outlook far beyond the narrow temporality of cruising encounters, and also bring that perspective to bear on contemporary queer politics. My second aim is to then demonstrate the potential of this method for contributing to the particular history of the family in Ireland, by continuing my opening vignette of George Davidson’s urban encounter. If we look beyond the criminal archive, we can see how queer Irish men could be tolerated and even supported by their families, both during and after an arrest, despite a broader discourse of homophobic stigma and sexual prudery. George then becomes not just a helpless victim of oppression, or someone who had a sexual encounter in an alleyway, but a son and brother who both gave and received love and care across the almost eighty years of his life.
2. Digital and genealogical methods for uncovering queer lives

My approach to recovering the life of George Davidson is inspired especially by the recent feminist work of Laite (2021) and Rubenhold (2019). In reconstructing the lives and agency of working-class women in Victorian and Edwardian Britain, both echoed the ethos and motivations of social history that can be traced especially to Thompson’s (1963) foundational work, but drew on digital genealogy to enrich their creative narratives. Revealing the lives of queer men can follow a similar approach. When men were arrested for cruising, the authorities recorded their age, occupation, birthplace and current address, religion, and next of kin. Using these key biographical details, we can match-up individuals to the quantitative non-criminal life-data collected about them at other points by the bureaucratic state. Records such as the census, birth-marriage/death registrations or military service allow us to locate them at different times in their life and in various social contexts, from work and home to war and workhouse. The next step is to add flesh to the bones of this skeleton. Before digitisation, chancing upon qualitative descriptions of unknown working-class queer men outside of the criminal archive usually took sheer luck or hundreds of hours of reading microfilmed newspapers. Now, colourful notices of the family milestones in a man’s lifecycle, or his involvement in associational activities such as sport and religion, can be located with a judicious text-search in digitised newspapers of his name and/or address. The digital turn undeniably still has limitations, both ethical and methodological, but there are now significant possibilities for detailing the lives of working-class queer men in their broader social world.

In the last couple of decades, historians have used similar techniques to give rich depth to figures as diverse and hitherto unknowable as poor match girls (Koven, 2014), urban silk-weavers (Kean & Wheeler, 2003), cross-dressers and others who transgressed gender norms (Wells, 2021; Thomason, 2020), men who were involved in a queer personal advertisements scandal (van den Berg, 2021), and, in my own work, a network of queer soldiers and civilians during the First World War (Hulme, 2021). There have been a variety of sometimes opposing purposes in focusing in on a ‘microhistory’ (Brewer, 2010; Lepore, 2001) or ‘historical biography’ (Renders et al., 2016) of one or more figures: they can be chosen because they were either exceptional or exemplars, encapsulated a specific subculture or represent larger social, political or economic processes. Julia Laite (2020), in assessing these approaches and charting her own path, emphasises a different goal: challenging the assumptions that come with the ambitiously broad sweeps of ‘big histories’ by insisting on the fundamental humanity of ‘small histories’. Through the creation of small queer histories, we can restore dignity to figures who usually only appear briefly in larger reconstructions of sexual subcultures, and often at their most vulnerable moment. This ethos is especially useful for thinking about family lives – a context that is usually assumed to have been solely repressive for queer men in previous eras.

3. Queering family history: perils and possibilities

What are the theoretical and practical implications of queering family history, given that a guiding motivation for its original practitioners has been the deep sense of emotional connection between past and present that it provides (Cannell, 2011;
Shaw, 2020)? Making similar links between historical sexual desires and contemporary identities has long been a thorny issue in histories of sexuality (overview: Garton, 2004, ch. 1; Weeks, 2016, ch. 3). The first pioneering works in gay and lesbian history were partly about looking for historic homosexuals, tracing back an unchanged or essentialised sexuality with the sociopolitical goal of demonstrating how this minority had always existed (e.g. Boswell, 1980; Hyde, 1970; Rowse, 1977). Though that approach survives in popular gay histories, and in a nuanced fashion in some academic studies (Norton, 1997), the rise of social constructionism in the late 1970s and 1980s heralded a theoretical departure. Drawing on sociology (McIntosh, 1968) and catalysed by Foucault (1978), this next generation of scholars argued that sexual desires and practices, let alone internalised identities, were not biologically fixed but instead a discursive product of time and place (Weeks, 1977; Plummer, 1981; some essays in Vicinus & Chauncey, 1989). In seeking to uncover ordinary or hidden gay and lesbian lives, though, these activist-academics did not lose the desire to ‘reclaim’ and connect historical studies with the political present (Weeks, 2012, pp. 528–9).

Fresh and even more combative challenges to gay and lesbian history emerged from the rise of queer theory in the 1990s, though there were some attempts to cut through the rancour and demonstrate the continuities as well as the breaks (e.g. Duggan, 1995). Eve Sedgwick, writing in the literary studies tradition, was one of the most influential voices. She contended that one of the shibboleths of the constructionists, the emergence of the defined ‘homosexual’ category in the late nineteenth century, had failed to appreciate how other models of desire, identity and non-identity could co-exist beyond that date (Sedgwick, 1990, esp. pp. 44–8). This argument has been especially influential in the ‘new British queer history’ (Lewis, 2013) and Irish urban queer histories that followed (Earls, 2016, 2020; Hulme, 2021). Doan (2013), however, went even further with her call for an alternative ‘critical queer history’: an approach that is not about lineage but rather the ‘unknowability and indeterminacy of the sexual past’ (pp. 58–66). She suggested that our desire for a usable history, evident in the work of both essentialists and social constructionists, led historians to create rather than discover the stable queer subject.

The outcome of these theoretical shifts is that the small queer history methodology I have outlined might look like old wine in new bottles: an attempt to construct an ancestry between contemporary identities and historical desires, if now through the prism of family history. To pre-empt this criticism, I suggest here that the fundamental difference of the sexual past, as Doan rightly identifies, is why it is so important for queer people today. Like Evans (2011) has argued, it is the surprising aspects of family histories that have the power to unsettle powerful and often-damaging myths. The tracing of past lives can engender empathy and moral encouragement because they are not the same as our own (Cannell, 2011; Shaw & Donnelly, 2021). This contemporary value of family histories, I would argue, can survive the queering of its methodology. As Evans (2023) has suggested, echoing the pioneering collection of essays on gay shame by Halperin and Traub (2009), even the uncomfortable characteristics of historical sexual transgression can provide a way to think about ‘new sociopolitical futures’ (Evans, 2023, pp. 2–7). Evans’ model of ‘queer kinship’ emphasises the coalitions between sexually and racially marginalised groups, and is necessarily more radical than a ‘queer kinship’ based on the connections formed by blood and marriage, but the ‘relational ways in which people
have navigated homophobia and persecution’ (Evans, 2023, p. 214) can also be found in historical family formulations. A renewed historicist approach (Halperin, 2002, p. 23), now mindful of the queer theory critique, can thus still draw on the emotively generative power of our ‘common human aspirations across the chasm of time’ (Traub, 2013; Weeks, 2012, pp. 538–9) to find instructive value in past queer lives.

Queering family history may be tentatively useful in the present for ‘us’, but we still need to consider the ramifications of being able to access marginalised lives at the click of a button (Laite, p. 978; Meyer & Moncrieff, 2021, pp. 80–2). Family history, after all, is by definition primarily the purview of descendants, and there are ethical issues if scholars begin to trespass on their patch to write about private sex lives. Records of same-sex desire were created through detection, exposure, and punishment, and connecting that criminal history to a family tree – or leaving the clues for others to follow the same trail – is analogous to ‘outing’ a convicted man for a second time. The living, whether committee of consensual sexual ‘crimes’ or those who were propositioned, are naturally entitled to privacy. Even if our subjects are dead, is the importance of anonymising waived? There are some scholars who suggest it is simply unnecessary to name historical figures who were convicted of a sexual act that is no longer a crime (e.g. Bingham et al., 2016). We may claim in response that we have virtuous objectives of ‘social recovery’ or ‘historical rescue’, but we risk prioritising ourselves over our subjects (Laite, 2020, p. 980; Love, 2009, ch. 1; Phillips, 2008, pp. 55–6). The dead cannot decide whether they want to be reborn as a queer hero today.

These are real risks, but we must be aware of what is lost if we obscure the identities of the queer men we write about, or choose not to look at them at all. As Bengry (2015, 2021) has noted in his own reflections on family history, the long-established gay social politics of celebrating the tenacity of those now gone relies on knowing our protagonists. These justifications for queer historical visibility retain their importance today, as public historians and museums studies scholars are well aware (e.g. Adair & Levin, 2020; Jetté, 2019). If we prioritise the anticipated negative feelings of descendants when writing small queer histories, we might ‘skew’ (van den Berg, 2021, p. 9) our narratives or, much worse, reinforce homophobic or transphobic discourses of shame that aim to keep sexual and gender diversity hidden. Considering how we can write sensitively about our subjects of course remains at the forefront of an ethical historical practice, and we should not transpose our own desires onto those who can no longer speak for themselves (de Baets, 2009). These cautions, however, must be balanced with the powerfully political queer yearning for a ‘partial, affective connection, for community, for even a touch across time’ (Dinshaw, 1999, p. 21).

4. Queer Irishmen: trapped in the family cell?

In the rest of this article, reflecting the theme of this journal’s special issue, my aim is to demonstrate how the methodology and theory outlined above can be applied in a way that helps us further develop the flourishing history of the Irish family (Breathnach, 2008; Earner-Byrne, 2018; Murphy, 2022). In recent years there has been significant progress in Irish queer studies, with work by historians such as Earls (2016, 2019, 2020), Lacey (2009), McAuliffe (2020, 2023) and Sonja Tiernan (2012) revealing the politics, policing and everyday realities of same-sex
relationships in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The subdiscipline is still relatively young, though, and how queer men were treated by their kin is one historiographical gap (Hulme, 2021, pp. 239–40; Lawless & Breathnach, 2022, p. 180).

The rich scholarship on the development of heteronormative patriarchal discourse in Ireland provides a broader context for how queer men were viewed in the social hierarchy. Kathryn Conrad (2004), following Backus (1999) and taking a Foucauldian perspective, has shown how the ‘family cell’ powerfully shaped normative sexuality and the development of national discourses. British colonialism, capitalism and Christianity in the early modern period, and the rise of pseudoscientific and psychological understandings of race and sexual behaviour in the nineteenth century, all led to the continuing concentration of resources in the family unit (Conrad, 2004, pp. 3–4). In the Victorian era, women had been categorised in Catholic and Protestant thought, and pseudo-scientific discourse too, as blessed with a ‘heightened sense of right and wrong in sexual matters’ (Brozyna, 1999; McLoughlin, 1994, pp. 266–7), while men were driven by sexual desires that they were supposedly helpless to control. Though there some moralists who, in tune with the feminist movement, sought to challenge this gendered hypocrisy, the results were profound (Cronin, 2012, p. 65). Women found their bodies and sexuality increasingly and harshly contained through state policy, legal punishment and religious reformatory institutions, while the many indiscretions of men were hypocritically ignored.

When the Irish Free State was created out of the partition of the island in the early 1920s, the family and home was reaffirmed as central to the political construct of a postcolonial and devoutly Catholic nation, if in need of protection against the temptations and immorality of modern mass culture, from lewd literature to sensuous dancing (Conrad, 2004, pp. 15–22; Crowley & Kitchin, 2008; Earner-Byrne, 2008; Fischer, 2016; O’Connor, 2003; Smith, 2007, ch. 2; Valiulis, 2008). Northern Ireland, which as a polity was really a continuation of a British regime rather than an active break, did not require the emotive language of nation-building to the same degree, though a more definite sense of a masculine Ulster Protestant identity did grow (McGaughey, 2012). Regardless, the unionist elite and dominant Protestant churches, influenced by moral currents across the border, continued to stress the Christian ideal of family and the morality of the new statelet, even as compared to the nation over the Irish Sea to which it remained emotionally and politically wedded (McCormick, 2013, pp. 27-8; McCormick, 2015, p. 139; Muldowney, 2008, p. 403).

In practice, despite this regional piety, queer men existed in an ambiguous social and legal context in Ireland. Colonial-era laws that criminalised same-sex encounters – primarily the Offences Against the Person Act in 1861 and the Criminal Law Amendment Act in 1885 – were kept and used in both jurisdictions after partition. Yet though transgressive sex was weaponised in the name of family and nation in nationalist discourse in the late nineteenth century, and there were occasional crackdowns in Dublin after the later 1920s, it was not queer men but women who mostly bore the brunt of state and religious regulation (Earls, 2016, 2019). Sex between men was not encouraged nor officially tolerated, but in practice it escaped open discussion and consistent regulation, as the suppression the report of the Committee on the Criminal Law Amendment Acts and Juvenile Prostitution in 1931 (‘Carrigan Report’) in the Irish Free State demonstrates (Finnane, 2001; Hug, 1998, p. 207; Kennedy, 2000; Smith, 2004).
Crucially, as Conrad (2004) has suggested, again drawing on Foucault’s thoughts on social control and self-policing, the family cell protected itself from censure by hiding transgressions from potential sources of punishment such as the church, community and state. The choice for families and queer men in such a culture was simple: embarrassing public exposure or learning how tolerate diverse sexual desires in their own home, neighbourhood or workplace. If it was silence rather than disclosure that defined the public discourse of same-sex desire in modern Ireland, we must look more closely at the family to reconstruct the private reality of queer life that the purposefully ‘dishonest’ (Ferriter, 2009, p. 15) historical rhetoric of Irish sexual purity has obscured (Inglis, 2005).

In the small queer history\(^\text{12}\) of George Davidson’s life that follows, I do not avoid the questions of what men did together nor how they were treated by the legal authorities, and I am still concerned with what we can learn about queer life in the modern Irish city (Hulme, 2021). But my emphasis here is on how such urban encounters and lives were shaped by the depth of social connections outside of cruising scenes. The family, and the extended networks of which it was a part, worked as a ‘process’ or ‘web of lived relationships’ rather than a ‘blueprint’ of ‘pre-given roles’ (Davidoff, 2011, p. 16; Morgan, 1996). In economic terms, it was a unit to which queer men both contributed and benefited: the complex power relationships between relatives shaped whether financial support would be provided, both during and after an arrest. But real affective bonds were also a feature of domestic and local life. The social status of a queer man, both within the family and his wider network of friends and neighbours, now determined whether he would be reincorporated back into his social milieu over the longer duration of his life, or cast out as an irredeemable object of shame.

5. The country widow’s son: a small queer history

George Davidson was born in the early 1880s in Ballycloghan, which lies between the villages of Ballygowan and Saintfield in Co. Down. He was the first of eight children and over twenty years older than his youngest brother.\(^\text{13}\) Almost every single one of the families in this rural settlement of about thirty houses relied on farming to make a living. George’s father worked in dealing flax, the raw material of the linen industry that was so crucial to Ulster’s success. The crop, though more commonly imported by the end of the nineteenth century, was still grown on some farms in this area, usually as one of several others (Kennedy, 1985, pp. 15–16; Shaw, 1994, p. 1). George’s father probably sold his wares onto the scutchers and spinning mills along the Glen and Ballygowan rivers nearby, or maybe he exported to the larger linen towns of the region such as Lisburn. Unfortunately for the Davidson’s, the prosperity of the countryside was generally declining at this time, and reaching its lowest ebb when George likely left Ballycloghan National School at fourteen (Griffith, 1982, p. 14). He was both the eldest and yet still a young man, and so probably first in line for inheriting the farm after his father died in 1905 (Guinnane, 1997, pp. 146–154). Yet unlike his brothers, who initially stayed on as labourers, George looked for work further afield.

By the early 1900s, George was employed in the capital of the region: Belfast. The city had grown at an alarming rate in the second half of the nineteenth century, trebling from 121,000 in 1861 to 350,000 in 1901, with the 1890s being a particularly booming decade
(Maguire, 2009, p. 114). There was plenty of economic pull for a rural dweller like George (Royle, 2012). He first got a job as a milk deliveryman, doing the simple but important work that fed the modern industrial economy. The dairy that employed him was based in Cregagh, a just-about-rural district right on the southern edge of the booming town that had become a city dubbed Linenopolis. He likely travelled the ten miles or so on the commuter train that stopped at Shepherd’s Bridge near his home, though he may have sometimes stayed overnight in some of the cheaper boarding houses of Carrick Hill or Sailortown (Coakham, 1998).

Economic motives were probably not the only thing pulling this young countryman into the city in the 1890s, and he may have had reason to linger after his daily work was done. Even if Belfast was not as vibrant as the more cosmopolitan capital of Dublin, and so pooh-poohed by some Northern Revival writers, it was still the only major centre of culture in the north of Ireland (Bardon, 2006; Kirkland, 2006, pp. 13–16). Its urban core, over the previous couple of decades, had been transformed into a showhouse of hulking and decorative commercial and civic buildings, with the main streets lined with grand theatres, department stores, hotels and pubs that demonstrated the civic pride of the city (Gunn, 2000; Harron, 2013; Hulme, 2019).

In October 1909, when George was 25, he had his first encounter with the law after an evening out in the beating heart of the city. He had been collecting money for his milk accounts one evening when he stopped off for refreshment in the Kitchen Bar, a well-known Victoria Square pub. Here he met John Maguire, who it seems was another milkman just a few years his senior. The two men had some drinks together before going next door to the lively Empire Theatre of Varieties, a venue that had been impressively rebuilt some fifteen years before (Findlater, 2001, ch. 14). On this evening, the two men could enjoy the light comedy of Harry Simms, the black and white minstrelsy of the well-known double act of Big Ben White and Little George Le Clerq, and catchy chorus songs sung by Carlotta Levy.

Entertained and likely drunk, they then went back to a room that George had booked in the nearby respectable Prince of Wales Hotel. They shared a bed for the night, which would not have been suspicious at the time for working-class men, but, with our power of hindsight, we can see there was perhaps more to this relationship (Crook, 2008). When George came round in the morning, probably with a groggy head, John was nowhere to be seen. Checking his pockets, George found that he had been liberated of his possessions: two watches, a chain, a cheque and cash totalling £8 – presumably the accounts he was meant to have taken back to his dairy boss in Cregagh. Likely panicking, he reported the theft and John was arrested soon after. But George decided against prosecution; he understood, he told the court, that John would give him his stuff back, though whether this happened is unclear.

It is difficult to tease apart what had gone on between these two young working-class men. John Maguire may have been ‘rough trade’ and expecting payment for whatever had happened in the hotel room; he may have had the intention of stealing from George from the outset; or perhaps he seized an opportunity to make a bit of money after carnal desires had been satisfied (Houlbrook, 2005, ch. 7; Meek, 2023, pp. 1–4). If John had indeed been a lover as well as a thief, George’s decision to have him arrested was an almighty risk when sex between men was illegal, if still rarely prosecuted in Ireland. A last-minute realisation that he might not want John sharing details of their night together may
have been why he hastily withdrew his desire for prosecution. For now, George could go back to his life without having it cross-examined and picked apart in the cold light of the courtroom.

When men like George were looking for sex in the city, there were plenty of places to go. Public toilets especially were a site of erotic opportunity. They legitimised a degree of visible public nudity, created the conditions for men to loiter, and were easily accessible around the city centre (Houlbrook, 2001). Enthusiastic cruisers in Belfast even toured between the most popular sites.\(^{19}\) The more basic urinals were usually less dangerous for queer men because they did not have attendants to keep an eye on what was happening inside. These loos were often sited in the Belfast entries, a series of narrow-covered alleyways that still run parallel between the main thoroughfares of the city. By the early twentieth century, this part of the city already had a long and deserved reputation as raucous, lawless and immoral (Gillespie, 2007, pp. 147–8).

Just two years after his Kitchen Bar encounter, it was down Cave Entry that George found himself in even bigger trouble. A constable was patrolling, late one evening in May, when he stumbled upon George with his arms tightly wrapped around the waist of William Knox.\(^{20}\) The culprits had very different accounts of how they came to be in such a revealing position. George insisted he had simply been chatting to the adolescent boy after relieving himself in a nearby urinal. William, on the other hand, told the policeman he had been in this urinal when he met George, who then invited him into the entry; George had apparently then taken out his ‘person’, as the clerk of the petty sessions court recorded it, and asked, ‘will you let me put this in between your legs?’\(^{21}\)

William Knox was not charged for any crime, but this does not mean the courts believed him when he claimed to have resisted George Davidson’s advances, especially given the constable made no reference to having witnessed physical force from either of them. The authorities preferred to make an example of older or better-off men who paid youths for sex, and the police and lawyers both knew that witness testimony was more persuasive than just their own observations. It also seems likely that they coached adolescent boys to weave a narrative the respectable members of the jury would want to hear (Maynard, 1997). We might ask even what William was doing a mile away from his home so late at night and down these notorious laneways. Belfast’s precarious street lads often featured in trials of those caught paying for sex; furtive ‘encounters’ (Cleves, 2020, p. 4) with men in urinals were not always pleasurable, but could be used to supplement the meagre income of low-skilled labour in the city, even if this unequal power dynamic has been an uncomfortable truth for the reclamation urge in queer history (Amin, 2017; Evans, 2023, ch. 2).

William Knox’s father and his brothers were coal carters or tobacco rollers, but at this point he was unemployed.\(^{22}\) So had he been selling sex out of desperation, looking to fulfil his own desires, or been forced into a tryst like he said? His queer afterlife suggests he was less of a victim than he maintained. In August 1915, he left his job as a waiter in Belfast and joined the Royal Naval Division to fight in the First World War. At some point after being hospitalised in Aldershot in England in 1918, he moved to London, where he again found work as a waiter.\(^{23}\) He now became a regular cruiser of the queer hotspots of Piccadilly in the West End and the Union Jack Club in Waterloo, the latter place maybe learned about through his naval comrades (Houlbrook, 2005, p. 48 & p. 149). He had
avoided prosecution in Belfast, but during the 1920s and 1930s he was arrested and sentenced to prison at least eleven times for importuning other men on the streets of London. The British capital’s unofficial vice squad were much more familiar with queer cultures than the Royal Irish/Ulster Constabulary; they recorded how William wore makeup, used an effeminate voice, and even had a camp name, ‘Gertie’, tattooed on his arm.²⁴ But back in 1911, this future evidence could not make any difference: George Davidson had been accused of ‘that crime not to be named among Christians’ with a youth ten years his junior, and so the wheels of the legal system began to turn.

George Davidson was placed in custody after his arrest and separated from his rural home. He probably believed that all he could do was await his shameful trial in July. But his people in Ballycloghan and the surrounding countryside now came to his rescue. Two middle-aged uncles – John Davidson and Samuel Scott – were the first to step forward.²⁵ Both men described themselves in the court documents as being mill owners, and were listed as a flax scutcher and farmer in the recently taken census. Given the often-small scale of the domestic flax industry, and George’s father’s occupation, perhaps this was a family business of sorts.²⁶ These uncles, who were now the figures of masculine authority in George’s life after his father’s death and also a precious economic resource, contributed the not insubstantial £50 of the £100 needed to get their nephew out on bail (Davidoff, 2011, ch. 7). George had by that time spent three weeks in custody, so perhaps they had taken time to sell possessions or collect money from the wider community. Either way, their actions show just how important for urban queer men in Ireland such rural ‘mutual aid’ networks could be (Arensberg & Kimball, 1940; Gray, 2014; Leyton, 1975).

When George had been arrested, he had pleaded – if the constable’s statement can be trusted – ‘Oh, do have mercy on me, I’m a widow’s son’.²⁷ This could have been a ploy to elicit sympathy, or maybe George was genuinely worried about the effect that public shame might have on a fragile mother. But it was this widow, Mary Jane Davidson, along with George’s uncles, who came forward as witnesses for the defence in his trial.²⁸ No record of what they said has survived, but relatives sometimes attested in court to the essential good character or respectability of the accused in Belfast, regardless of what sexual crime they had committed (Brady, 2005, p. 21; Smith, 2015, ch. 4).²⁹

In the end, George withdrew his previous plea of not guilty and agreed to submit to the court’s judgement. The admittance of wrongdoing could have been honest contrition or a realisation that he had little chance of a successful defence, but it might also have been a clever strategy. The Irish legal system did not yet have a firm understanding of homosexuals as a congenital type, so George might have managed to argue this was a one-off encounter and momentary lapse of sanity caused by his drinking (an excuse he had tried when arrested). He would have been helped in this reasoning by the fact that Irish juries were empathetic to the widespread sociomedical concern about the link between alcohol addiction and immorality (Ferriter, 2009, p. 9; Mauger, 2023, pp. 523–9; McAuley, 1997, pp. 249–53). George was treated leniently, perhaps also because it was his first offence, and discharged: free to continue his life as long as he stayed out of trouble.³⁰

By 1918, George had left Ballycloghan, a decision that may have been provoked by countryside communal judgement. Sam Shaw, a farmer in the Saintfield area in the 1920s, reminisced later in the twentieth century that ‘Everybody knew everybody . . . Neighbours used to gather in the evenings and discuss and natter about recent happenings’ (2005,
p. 2). Shaw understood that such closeness could help create a community, but it surely meant that gossip about court cases would travel too (Farrell, 2015, ch. 4). Michael McLaverty, one of Ulster’s most prominent mid-century authors, also lauded the countryside sense of community but recognised the difficult situation that gossip around scandal could create. In his novel The Three Brothers (McLaverty, 1948), for example, the financial embezzlement of one brother is hushed up by the village priest to stop it reaching the law or the press, but, as another brother laments, the locals never forgot: ‘They hold an evil thing in their minds as easily as they remember their prayers’ (p. 6).

If George’s mother and his spinster sister, Catherine, were ashamed about what he had done, that did not stop them deciding to come with him when he moved into Belfast. In fact, many of his siblings and their spouses now made the same rural-to-urban migration as agriculture in the region continued its steady decline (Greer, 2012, p. 275). George’s brother Samuel and sister Minnie both lived on the same Derwent Street in the east of the city, while his brother Andrew was less than a mile away on Channing Street. After Mary Jane Davidson died in 1935 at the age of 71, Catherine continued to be listed as the main occupier of the house she shared with George, a ‘sister housekeeper-companion’ that may have given respectability to her ‘bachelor brother’ (Davidoff, 2011, p. 138).

George was now working as a commercial traveller of some sort, a job that might have brought its own opportunities for casual sexual encounters with other men (Syrett, 2012). It does seem that he continued to live a queer life despite what had happened in Cave Entry in 1911. When a 21-year-old hairdresser called Frank Kirkpatrick succumbed to pneumonia over a quarter of a century later, a family memoriam notice in the Belfast Telegraph included George as a ‘dear friend’ – the only mourner to be described in that way. Younger men often had romantic and intimate relationships with older benefactors that could be accepted by their working-class parents, whether out of financial gain or simply open mindedness (Earls, 2020; Houlbrook, pp. 184–6). The exact nature of the friendship between George and Frank is now lost, but the detail is suggestive to say the least.

After seemingly managing to avoid the law for over forty years, George was arrested again in 1952. Now aged seventy, he had been loitering on the Newtownards Road, not far from his house, at about 9 o’clock at night. When a constable observed how George seemed to be standing very close together with Walter Rennie, a labourer in his early fifties, he fetched another policeman and they followed the two suspects into a nearby alleyway. According to these witnesses, George now had his back against the wall and had wrapped his overcoat around Walter, in an attempt to disguise how the younger man was kneeling in front of his privates. George, after the encounter was broken up, claimed that he had simply stopped for a pee, and that Walter had then stopped down and taken his ‘person’ into his mouth; Walter insisted that it was in fact George who had dragged him into the alleyway. These two men actually lived on adjacent streets, so it seems more than likely that they already knew each other in this close-knit district of the city.

When George was taken into custody, he twice pleaded to be let go and lamented ‘This is my life ruined’. We can only imagine the pain and anxiety this now elderly man must have felt. But, just as had been the case the first time he was arrested, his family were on his side. George covered his own bail of £10, but his cousin John Davidson – a son of one of the uncles who had appeared in court on George’s behalf over forty years before – now stood up in court to play the same role. This character statement may have been why the
courts again took a relatively lenient approach, sentencing both of the accused to one month in prison (instead of a possible two years) and with ‘suitable’ (rather than ‘hard’) labour.\(^{37}\)

When George died in 1962, at the age of 79, the small ripples of press reportage suggest that he had remained a part of his family and local community after being released a decade before. His brother Andrew – who, like George, was still living on Derwent Street – was present at the death.\(^{38}\) The Telegraph reported how the deceased was the ‘beloved brother of Catherine Davidson’ and his death ‘deeply regretted’ both by his ‘sorrowing brother, Charles’ and the wider ‘family circle’. His body was returned to Ballygowan churchyard in rural County Down, to be buried alongside the mother he had been so concerned about embarrassing over fifty years before.\(^{39}\) Public mourning in the press was conventional and unlikely to reveal family schisms (Fries, 1990), but silence was always a telling option and not one that was taken by the Davidson family. Instead, on the first anniversary of his death, Catherine again had her grief noted in the newspaper: ‘Cherished memories of my dear brother, George… always remembered by his sister’.\(^{40}\)

6. Conclusion: a new history of the Irish family

Postwar social scientists in Britain and the USA frequently agreed that ‘homosexuals’ were naturally and necessarily isolated from their relatives (Cohen, 2013, p. 156; Waters, 2012, pp. 694–5; Murray, 2010, p. x). Activists of the international gay rights movement that later followed tended to concur, though they saw this separation as an opportunity for building new communities of self-fulfilment or ‘families of choice’ (Donovan et al., 2001; Weston, 1991).\(^{41}\) The moral panics of the post-war years, and the development of ‘coming out’ as both a social and political act, had brought self-identifying gay men into new conflicts, and rendered the previously knowing ignorance or silence of families a much less successful method for tolerating queer desire (Plummer, 1995, ch. 6).

There were no sociological studies of homosexuality in Ireland, but we can see similar understandings of the incompatibility of the biological family and homosexuality when movements for law reform gained traction in the 1970s and 1980s.\(^{42}\) As McDonagh (2021) has shown, religious ‘family values’ were now used in the Republic of Ireland as a rhetorical device to oppose decriminalisation of sex between men (pp. 59–60 & 146–8). In reminiscences collated by activists in the Dublin Lesbian and Gay Men’s Collectives (1986), parents and siblings are shown as sometimes accepting, but shock, disgust and even disownment was seemingly more common. In Northern Ireland, the jurisdiction in which George Davidson died, policing tactics during the conflict known as the Troubles included threatening to out gay men by contacting their relatives (Duggan, 2012, pp. 52–4). The Reverend Ian Paisley’s infamous Save Ulster from Sodomy campaign, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, harked back to Victorian Irish discourses by depicting homosexuality as a foreign sin that directly attacked the family (Brady, 2022). Paisley ultimately lost his vitriolic battle, but the continuing role for the Free Presbyterian Church and the Democratic Unionist Party, which he founded in 1951 and 1971, respectively, means that this bigotry has arguably survived in a way that it has not in the Republic (Hulme, 2022; Kerrigan, 2021, chs. 5 & 6; Tiernan, 2020).

In constructing a narrative of one unknown man from Ireland, I have trespassed into private and intimate ‘unknown worlds’ (Light, 2014, p. xxviii) to reveal a queerly
different alternative to this more recent difficult history of intolerance. The shaming arrest that followed George Davidson’s cruising did not begin a process of disownment. Instead, it was his family that helped him mitigate the difficulties of the legal system and public exposure on at least two separate occasions. His mother, siblings, uncles and cousins all provided support, whether it was money for bail, character references in court, or a place to live after prison. Calvert and O’Riordan (2020) have recently reflected on how historians have yet to appreciate how the Irish family could deviate from traditional or nuclear forms. Like in other countries, working-class households in Ireland could in reality be malleable enough to tolerate or accommodate queer desires (Cook, 2014, p. 89; Johnson, 2013, p. 109). As some gay rights activists in Ireland argued later, ‘the perception of the Irish as irredeemably “backward” on sexual and social issues’ thus obscures the complexities of a historical ‘tradition of tolerance’ (Rose, 1993, p. 5).

There are some qualifications to this interpretation, of course. The fragments captured in sources such as the census or memoriam notices can only give us a glimpse into the day-to-day negotiation of a life that had undeniably been made more difficult because of public exposure. There were certainly men who found themselves emotionally and financially denied support at a moment of vulnerability and were forced to emigrate to escape the public shame, much like the Irish women who also deviated from the ‘moral code’ (Urquhart, 2012, p. 245). George Davidson certainly may have moved from the country to the city to escape scurrilous gossip after his case was named in the local newspaper. We can also only speculate whether he understood himself as ‘homosexual’ or part of a larger social group defined by same-sex desire. Even if he did, implicit acceptance may have been maintained only on the condition that the realities of his sexual behaviour went undiscussed with his otherwise loving family (Cohen, 2013, p. 157; Syrett, 2021).

Queer historians must certainly be careful, then, of not falling into a ‘nostalgia for the ambivalences and fluidities of the pre-gay-liberation world’ that was shaped in its own distinctive ways by ‘harsh prejudice and repression’ (Weeks, 2012, pp. 526–7). Nonetheless, the more complex view of familial relations that we can see through the small queer history of George Davidson’s life is a reminder that there is no simple teleology of acceptance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We can, however, still learn from his experiences and the loving response of his family, even if the historical specificity of his sexual desires or self-identity does not map onto our own so neatly.

Notes
2. ‘Queer’ is used in this article to refer to those who transgressed heteronormative systems of desire – ‘the normal, the legitimate, the dominant’, as Halperin (1997, p. 62) famously put it – and does not necessarily refer to a self-professed identity based on sexual object-choice.
3. Laite (2020, p. 966) has also made this point in relation to studies of female sex work.
4. For some exceptions, see Smith (2015, ch. 4) on the industrial north of England, which shows how homosexuality could tacitly be accepted within heterosexual working-class
marriages; Houlbrook (2005, pp. 159–60), on how working-class ‘queans’ could be ‘firmly integrated’ into the ‘everyday life’ of their communities; Howard (1999, pp. 40–8), on the centrality of family and home to both youthful and adult queer experiences in Mississippi; and Evans and Mailänder (2021, p. 35) for a beautiful example of unequivocal family support for a queer man persecuted in 1930s Germany. Oral histories, though not without their methodological issues and unavailable for the period/place of my Irish case study, can also shed light. See, as examples: the memories of British life collated in Porter and Weeks (1991); American gay men and women during WWII in Berube (1990); and queer men in Scotland from the mid twentieth century in Meek (2015).

5. ‘Queering’ here is akin to challenging and unsettling categories and understandings that have previously been considered natural and thus were imbued with power. Such an approach, to my knowledge, has not been theorised in family history, though there are some reflections on the using of wills (Monk, 2015) and oral history (McKay, 2007). There is, however, a fast-growing literature on queering families in the present; see, for an overview, Fish and Russell (2018).

6. Thompsonian social history was similarly important in the British development of the history of sexuality, especially the work of Weeks (1977, 1981, 2007), as noted by Waites (2007), and continues in for e.g. Leeworthy (2019).

7. Digitisation reflects powerful commercial imperatives and national policies, so chronological, geographic, and thematic coverage is uneven (Laite, 2020, pp. 978–80), and relying on only digitally accessible material can have a homogenizing effect on scholarship (Milligan, 2022, pp. 2–3, 8–9, 18–19). Technologies are also both imperfect and shape how we view information, often in isolation from its original context. Newspaper text searching, for example, means we only find that for which we are looking, and we may miss the nuances of euphemism or editorial placement (Bingham, 2010; Bunout et al., 2023), an issue especially important for queer history (Upchurch, 2013). For a broad and critical overview of the issues, see (Hitchcock, 2013).

8. Some of the files I use were locked by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland because of a 100-year rule for sexual crimes, but I have been allowed to publish their contents because the men can be proven to have died – see individual citations in following section. None of these men have living spouses, and no direct descendants either.

9. The whole of Ireland was previously a part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. In response to decades of instability around Home Rule, then the Irish Revolution (1916) and War of Independence (1919–21), Westminster passed the Government of Ireland Act (1920–1), which split the territory into two self-governing polities: six counties of the province of Ulster became Northern Ireland; and the provinces of Connaught, Leinster and Munster, plus three counties of Ulster, became Southern Ireland (though immediately contested). In 1922, Southern Ireland then formally left the United Kingdom to become the Irish Free State.

10. The infamous Labouchere Amendment (Section 11 of the Act) technically made it easier to prosecute men for sexual acts that did not involve anal penetration. Oscar Wilde was the most famous victim in 1895, but one of the earliest was an Irish Conservative MP from Belfast, Edward de Cobain (arrested 1891 and finally convicted in 1893).

11. For Dublin: a couple of men tried for gross indecency a year before 1926, but after roughly 8 to 15 was more common, and as high as 41 in 1931 (Earls, 2016, p. 115). In Belfast: rarely more than one or two cases of consensual sex between adults tried each year across the same period. Irish nationalism had constructed same-sex desire as a peculiarly English ‘foreign body’ in the family cell in the late nineteenth century, as seen in the Dublin Castle Scandal, and still clung onto this belief in the interwar period, which necessitated maintaining a degree of silence about homegrown sexual transgression (Earls, 2016, pp. 52–7).

12. In the narrative biographical approach I take, I have been inspired by recent conversations on creative historical writing (Twells et al., 2021), and the ‘rigorous speculation’ method detailed by Pooley (2021) and others (Lee Brien & Lindsey, 2021). I have made it clear in the narrative of George Davidson’s life when I am departing from the strict record to interpret more freely.
13. Census of Ireland 1901, House 7 in Ballycloghan (Ballygowan, Down); Census of Ireland 1911, House 23 in Ballycloghan (Ballygowan, Down). All Irish census records accessed via http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/.
15. The Northern Whig (1909) reported that Maguire was arrested on Cromac Street. In the 1901 census John Maguire (26, working as a ‘milk server’) lived with several young men in a dairyman’s house on Posnett Street, not far from Cromac. George probably knew John Maguire or one of his milkman housemates. See: Census of Ireland 1901, House 32 in Posnett Street (Cromac, Antrim).
16. The Empire (1909, October 5), Irish News and Belfast Morning News.
17. Belfast police intelligence (1909, October 8), Belfast News-Letter.
18. Alleged larcenies (1909, October 8), Northern Whig.
19. For an example of cottage touring in Belfast, see: PRONI, ‘James Douglas – assault and attempted buggery’ (1894), Crown Files, Recorder’s Court, BELF/1/2/2/4/72.
21. ‘George Davidson – gross indecency’ (1911).
22. Census of Ireland 1911, House 6 in North Queen Street (Dock Ward, Antrim).
24. I am indebted to Matt Houlbrook, who alerted me to the anonymized presence of William in his own research (2005) and shared his archival notes. See: The National Archives, ‘Defendant: Knox, William. Charge: importuning for immoral purposes’ (11th October 1938), Central Criminal Court, CRIM/1/1041; One of a gang: whipping for despicable character next time (1926, October 3), News of the World; Tower Bridge: Waterloo Road pests sentenced (1925, April 30), Illustrated Police News. A 1947 death notice for Charles G. Knox shows that his son William had not married by the time he was in his fifties; he died in 1973, seemingly without descendants. See: Deaths (1947, April 1), Northern Whig; and Knox – William John Leeburn Knox (1973, October 31), Belfast Telegraph.
25. ‘George Davidson – gross indecency’ (1911). To trace these family connections, see: GRONI, Marriage of Eliza Davidson and Samuel Scott, 26th September 1890, Castlereagh, M/1890/C1/983/4/6; Census of Ireland 1911, House 1 in Tullygarvan (Moneymore, Down).
26. In 1894, both John Davidson and Samuel Scott were fined in the same suit for allowing flax water to run into Saintfield’s river. See: Saintfield Petty Sessions (1894, September 22), Lisburn Standard.
27. ‘George Davidson – gross indecency’.
29. For example, the well-reported case of Richard Lutton and James McKee, in which the mother of the latter ‘gave evidence as to her son’s character’. Serious charge at the Recorder’s Court (1904, 23 September), Irish News and Belfast Morning News.
31. Belfast Street Directory (Belfast, 1918). I have benefitted from a fantastic online resource of searchable transcribed street directories: Lennon Wylie, https://www.lennonwylie.co.uk/index.htm. I have then confirmed the transcribed information in the physical published volumes.
32. A record in nominations (1929, May 21), Northern Whig.
33. Deaths (1935, September 21), Belfast Telegraph; In memoriam (1944, August 24), Belfast Telegraph.
34. GRONI, Francis Kirkpatrick, died 16th March 1937, Belfast, D/1937/58/1007/43/216; Deaths (1938, March 16), Belfast Telegraph.
35. PRONI, ‘George Davidson – gross indecency’ (1952), Crown Files, Recorder’s Court, BELF/1/2/2/62/161. Walter Rennie lived on Newcastle Street in his childhood home; his parents had died
in 1940 and 1947, but there were other family members nearby. See: Census of Ireland 1911, House 104 in Newcastle Street (Victoria, Down); Deaths (1940, April 9), Belfast Telegraph; Deaths (1947, May 9), Belfast Telegraph. I have not located a death record, but it is impossible that he is alive today.

40. Memoriam (1963, November 2), Belfast Telegraph.

It is worth noting that early twentieth century sexologists, such as Edward Carpenter and Magnus Hirschfeld, made similar points about how urban scenes thrived because of a lack of family ties but did not associate this with the creation of alternative sorts of family. See Abraham (2009, pp. 107–8).

42. The colonial-era laws that criminalised sex between men remained in place until 1982 for Northern Ireland and 1991 for the Republic of Ireland, both some way behind neighbouring England and Wales in 1967.

43. I am currently writing a book, tentatively titled Belfastmen: An Intimate Queer History, that incorporates these experiences of oppression and emigration.

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